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**TOXIC LEADERSHIP: A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO SHIFT  
FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE SOLUTIONS**

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*Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.*

- John Stuart Mill, British Philosopher (1 February 1867)

## **1. Introduction**

The problem of toxic leadership is conceptually complex because it involves human behaviors and interpersonal relations. Numerous authors have researched and studied the issue of toxic leadership. Consequently, there are abundant sources that analyze its intricacies. However, despite all this, the academic community has not reached a consensus on the definition of this elusive concept and on describing the behaviors and attributes toxic leaders display. This lack of a common ground on which to base policies and preventive measures permeates the US military. In fact, apart from the US Army Center for Army Leadership annual survey (CASAL), the rest of the services do not conduct any regular quantitative research on the incidence of toxic leadership within their organizations.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, many articles and research papers about toxic leadership in the military are available. However, just as their civilian counterparts, researchers on the military side have focused their academic work mainly on providing a definition of toxic leadership from the military perspective in order to facilitate its identification, with the ultimate goal of getting rid of those toxic leaders. In other words, their proposed prescriptions have been reactive in nature. The most important conclusion extracted from this fact is that the US military has not paid enough attention to the consequences of toxic leadership, with respect to the degree and magnitude of damage toxic leaders cause to an organization. This is especially important because the system only detects those toxic leader behaviors at a very late stage in the career of an officer/senior NCO. In a time when human resources are particularly scarce, the US military loses valuable personnel when it is too late to implement corrective action and after those toxic

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leaders have influenced negatively a great number of subordinates under their influence. The only option available then is discharge of the toxic leader.

This report argues that through education and feedback it is possible to detect early signs of toxic leadership in the US military and apply corrective measures so that potential toxic leaders can modify their behavior before derailing their careers and negatively influencing their subordinates. This would significantly benefit the organization by eliminating the pernicious effects of long lasting toxic leaders while rehabilitating them early on so they can contribute to its advancement with their full leadership potential.

The research team uses an inductive approach supported by exploratory design to address the topic of toxic leadership in the US military. Secondary data analysis (quantitative and qualitative) provides additional support to the proposed solution. This research paper first explores the various definitions of toxic leadership in order to discover its primary characteristics. All services within the DoD should agree in what constitutes toxic leadership in the military in order to provide a foundational consistency among its personnel. Next, the research team analyzes the consequences of toxic leadership in the US military, with the objective of stressing the importance of adopting and supporting the proposed solution. The report then explores the issue of why toxic leadership persists in the military, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the problem. Subsequently, the paper presents a parallel case study and explains how education helped increase sexual assault awareness and mitigate its impact. Finally, the report presents and describes a comprehensive approach to shift the paradigm to mitigating toxic leadership from reactive to proactive solutions. This description covers an

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educational component and a feedback component. The study finalizes with the presentation of conclusions.

## **2. Framing Toxic Leadership**

Leadership is a widely discussed topic in military and civilian organizations. It is estimated that poor leadership and management practices cost the US economy around half a trillion dollars each year.<sup>2</sup> Gallup's 2013 *State of the American Workplace* report generated this figure, adding that 50 percent of employees primarily do the minimum at work, while 20 percent deliberately employ counterproductive behaviors. These statistics are alarming but should not be entirely surprising to military leaders. Military organizations, regardless of service, fundamentally believe that poor leadership will result in poor performance. Fortunately, leaders can develop and improve their skills over time. However, just as leadership skills can improve over time, character flaws that hurt the organization and its members can also grow over time. This relationship is what this report aims to capture. To assist this effort, the report provides a better understanding of toxic leadership by defining it to a basic and simple level. Nevertheless, there are inherent problems in this task.

Toxic leadership is not easy to define because it is extremely difficult to conceptualize in a brief statement what type of behaviors constitute toxic leadership and which ones do not. Yet, providing a definition of toxic leadership is crucial in order to try reducing its incidence in the military. The reason for this is obvious. An agreed-upon definition of toxic leadership would provide everyone in the military with a common understanding of the concept. However, to this day, there is no consensus on a definition, although many experts have tried to garner agreement before. In her book *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*, Lipman-Blumen, defines toxic leadership as

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“leaders who engage in numerous *destructive behaviors* and who exhibit certain *dysfunctional personal characteristics*”<sup>3</sup> [emphasis in original]. She then signifies that to count as toxic, those behaviors and characteristics must cause considerable and long-term damage to their followers and to the organization.<sup>4</sup> It stands out that Lipman-Blumen avoids providing a very specific definition of toxic leadership. Instead of clearly defining the concept, the author is vague, only mentioning concepts such as “numerous destructive behaviors” and “certain dysfunctional characteristics.” Another example from an expert in toxic leadership incurs in the same vagueness. In his book *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the US Military*, George Reed, a retired army officer, defines toxic leadership as “demotivational behavior that negatively impacts unit morale and climate.”<sup>5</sup> Again, this pattern of ambiguity leaves the reader wondering what “demotivational behavior” means. An analysis of the doctrinal definition within the armed forces yields similar conclusions.

The official 2012 US Army leadership doctrine document, ADRP 6-22 *Army Leadership*, contends that a toxic or abusive leader is someone who consistently takes certain behaviors to the extreme. These behaviors include the use of inappropriate strategies to obtain immediate results; mindless adherence to orders without concern for others; selfish attitudes that ignore ideas from others; micromanagement; hoarding information; undermining peers; and working to look good to supervisors.<sup>6</sup> More recently, the 2014 CASAL survey steers away from the term toxic leadership and towards a more subtle term, “counter-productive leadership”. This survey concedes that counter-productive behaviors, at the most detrimental level, manifest themselves as toxic leadership, which it defines as “a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization and mission

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performance.”<sup>7</sup> The definitions of toxic leadership so far have all encountered the same problem of being purposefully vague to avoid constraining toxic leadership to those behaviors and attitudes that fit into those definitions. Risking contribution to this pattern of vagueness, this paper provides a definition of toxic leadership, but then complements it with a set of characteristic behaviors prevalent in toxic leaders. The combination of both will achieve one the objectives of this report.

A definition of toxic leadership should capture the *destructive behaviors* and *dysfunctional personal characteristics* that inflict harm on others and on their organizations.<sup>8</sup> Examples include a lack of integrity, insatiable ambition, enormous ego, arrogance, recklessness, and cowardice.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, to assist the objective of this report, the research team adopted the definition of leadership Dr. John C. Maxwell provides. Dr. Maxwell, a known scholar on leadership, summarizes leadership in one word, “influence”. Expanding this logic, this report considers toxic leadership as “harmful influence that is antithetical to human dignity, organizational values and success.” Derived from organizational core values, this definition keeps the needed maneuvering space for leaders to make unpopular decisions that are in the services’ best interests, while also safeguarding against the common character flaws that generate such vitriolic discussions and concerns about toxic leadership in the military. This definition is also applicable to toxic organizations with harmful cultures. These organizations also exist in the military and present such problems as detrimental policies and practices, unreasonable performance goals, excessive internal competition, and a culture of blame.<sup>10</sup> As with toxic leaders, toxic organizations exert harmful influence on its members and missions, and if left unchecked, can develop parochial interests within them. As previously mentioned, apart

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from providing a definition, the objective will be to analyze toxic leadership behaviors to provide a set of characteristics that are prevalent in most toxic leaders, with the understanding that those characteristics do not intend to be all-inclusive.

A determination of what behaviors and personal characteristics are representative in toxic leadership must supplement its definition. In order to do so, it is worth analyzing the behaviors authors consider destructive. On that regard, Einarsen, Schanke and Skogstad define destructive behavior as “the systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of his/her subordinates.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout his book *Tarnished*, Reed provides many examples of characteristic behaviors of toxic leaders. He does not provide a definitive list, but the research team considers the following ones as fairly representative of toxic leadership styles. Toxic leaders normally pursue their own enhancement, even at the expense of those they lead, while undermining the genuine interest of the organizations they serve.<sup>12</sup> They also damage the motivation, well-being and job satisfaction of their subordinates.<sup>13</sup> Another important attribute of toxic leaders is their inclination to lying and misleading through acts of omission and commission.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, toxic leaders consistently resort to their hierarchical position to impose their vision on others forcefully, and often discourage initiative in their subordinates.<sup>15</sup> Finally, toxic leaders are often unable or unwilling to take responsibility for their actions, and they are skillful manipulators of others.<sup>16</sup>

In their book *The Extraordinary Leader*, Zenger and Folkman’s research allowed them to identify the 16 most important competencies a leader must have. For example, consider the

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competencies “inspires and motivates others to high performance,” “develops others,” “collaboration and teamwork,” “displays high integrity and honesty,” or “builds relationships.”<sup>17</sup> The opposite of any of these competencies could relate to a characteristic toxic behavior. In addition, Zenger and Folkam identify 10 fatal flaws with the potential of derailing any leader. When taken to the extreme, any of them could represent destructive leadership as well. For instance, to name a few, “not inspiring due to lack of energy or enthusiasm,” “not a good role model,” “no learning from mistakes,” “not a collaborative team player,” “lacking interpersonal skills,” or “focusing on self and not developing others.”<sup>18</sup> The previous discussion provides a framework of reference as to what behaviors characterize toxic leadership. Subsequently, a brief analysis of its consequences will help in understanding the implications of these destructive conducts.

### **3. The Consequences of Toxic Leadership**

As mentioned before, leadership is a process of influence, in which the relationship between the leader and his/her followers plays a central role. When leadership is effective, that relationship adopts the form of a partnership, instead of the more formal hierarchical construct.<sup>19</sup> In the military, when that affiliation involves toxic and destructive behaviors on the part of the leader, it affects unit cohesion, the careers of subordinates, and their quality of life.<sup>20</sup> This displeasure permeates the whole range of work relationships, not just the leader-subordinate interaction, and victims of toxic leadership usually see their relationships with peers and subordinates affected by the toxicity of their supervisor.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, those under the influence of toxic leaders report lower levels of job satisfaction.<sup>22</sup> However, the most pernicious consequences are the result of how victims decide to deal with toxic leaders.



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When deciding how to deal with toxic leaders, victims are inclined to respond by either evading the situation or by replicating it.<sup>23</sup> This sets the foundation for the pattern of damage toxic leaders create. Evading toxic leaders translates into higher turnover rates among the subordinates under their influence. In the case of the military, this translates into an increase in the numbers of personnel discontinuing their affiliation with the armed forces and the loss of valuable human capital. In other instances, at a minimum, it means a request to transfer to a different assignment at the earliest possible opportunity. With regard to the replication of toxic behaviors, its consequences are also quite serious. At the center of this lies the fact that, in many instances, toxic leaders continue to thrive and succeed in their careers. This fuels some of their subordinates' perceptions that the organization condones those behaviors and that, in fact, they serve as a role model to follow in the path to success. Moreover, even when those subordinates cease to be under the influence of toxic leaders, this template of toxicity continues to expand, affecting more and more individuals. All this paints a grim picture of the consequences of toxic leadership, and supports what Reed depicts in *Tarnished* as "a wake of destruction."<sup>24</sup> A useful analogy is the wave pattern a boat creates when moving forward, which gets wider and wider the further away the boat moves. Accordingly, the higher the toxic leader gets in rank, and the longer he exhibits toxic behaviors, the wider his pattern of toxic influence becomes. Consequently, within that pattern, an increasingly higher number of subordinates choose to either escape the situation or emulate it, spreading and widening the pattern of toxicity. Interestingly enough, Zenger and Folkman reach similar conclusions in *The Extraordinary Leader*.

Zenger and Folkman's research shows that the impact of poor leadership has a significant influence on an organization's success. According to them, the impact of leadership "affects

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every measurable dimension of organization performance; is large, not trivial; is extremely consistent; and has highly interrelated areas of impact.”<sup>25</sup> Concerning employee turnover, their research supports the argument that the relationship an employee has with his or her manager has a substantial influence on their decision to stay with the company or move on. For instance, their data confirms that the bottom 30% of leaders experience a turnover rate of 19%, while the top 10% had a turnover rate of just 9%.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, they reach identical conclusions when analyzing the subordinates’ tendency to mimic toxic behavior. According to Zenger and Folkman, leaders have a considerable influence in the organizations where they work. In order to prove this theory, they tested it by conducting an empirical analysis of 360-degree feedback results of a group of managers, and compared them with those of their subordinates, who were also lower level managers. What they found is that a significant overlap exists in how employees perceive those leaders. The data shows that those under the influence of bad leadership behaviors have a tendency to reflect those behaviors on their subordinates.<sup>27</sup> After establishing the main characteristics of toxic leadership, and analyzing the impact it has on subordinates and on the organization, further understanding of the problem requires answering the question of why subordinates choose to follow toxic leaders.

#### **4. The Appeal of Toxic Leadership**

Reflecting on the agreed-upon definition of toxic leadership: “harmful influence that is antithetical to human dignity, organizational values and success,” it is imperative to establish some fundamental truths that illuminate why toxic leadership endures. First, and on a basic level, all leaders have some level of harmful influence. Fortunately, the military development system understands that all men and women are flawed, and that it takes a conscious effort, and

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long-term practice, to provide superior leadership to Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines. Therefore, in order to explore why toxic leaders are prevalent in organizations, it is necessary to leverage psychology, sociology, and anecdotal evidence within the constraints of common sense. Toxic leaders are individuals who deliberately manipulate circumstances and/or leverage situational and power dynamics to achieve their goals at the expense of the organization and its personnel. Therefore, it is important to examine first toxic leadership from a follower's point of view.

Human psychological needs frequently drive individuals to seek out and follow toxic leaders. At the forefront of the individual drive to follow others is achievement ethic and self-esteem. Achievement ethic is the society standard by which individuals measure success and assess the meaning of their lives. Those who surpass this standard provide an example for others to emulate. Achievement increases self-confidence and decreases follower reliance on leaders who promise to provide safety in an uncertain world.<sup>28</sup> Self-esteem, for its part, is the confidence and satisfaction in oneself.<sup>29</sup> It changes based on how others view individuals in comparison to society and organizational measures. Over time, followers strengthen their self-esteem through positive achievement and success within cultural standards. However, when followers have low self-esteem and/or fail to succeed, they look towards others who offer strength and solutions to their insecurities.<sup>30</sup> The three main drivers for this need to find strong leaders are, their promise to keep followers safe, affirmation that followers are special, and opportunity for followers to sit at the "community table".<sup>31</sup> The need for a reassuring authority figure who provides firm guidance develops in adolescence, and for individuals with poor parental relationships, can offer strength that fills parents' shortcomings later in life. Similarly,

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followers who have not resolved poor relationships with authority figures from childhood repeatedly seek out toxic leaders to fix bad authority experiences.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, seldom do individuals with low self-esteem look merely for a strong leader to follow who has all of the answers. Most of the time, especially in the military, members desire primarily to be part of a cohesive group with a significant purpose. Naturally, toxic leaders leverage this desire to feel chosen as part of an important group to shape social dynamics, keep dissenters in line, and ultimately achieve their goals. In this environment, toxic leaders normally use control myths, a collection of ideas and norms to keep members in line. Control myths are powerful because they influence not only the follower's needs, but also the leader's needs.<sup>33</sup> In addition, toxic leaders keep members of a group in line by punishing them with the group's scorn when they counter control myths. On that regard, psychology research shows that within group dynamics, fear of social death may be just as great, if not greater, than fear of actual death.<sup>34</sup> In her book *Toxic Leaders*, Jean Lipman-Blumen offers valuable insights into how toxic leaders use the myth of the "chosen" to distance their followers from the "others." Because social norms influence and inform individual expectations and behaviors, leaders can leverage these norms to gain strong effects on their followers.<sup>35</sup> Using this group dynamic, the "in" group has a lot of power and can coerce followers to stay within its rules. For those members who feel that the group's values are outside of the organization's values, confronting toxic leaders often amounts to professional and personal suicide with fear of ostracism and social death, therefore keeping followers quiet. These dissenters become public examples that Lipmann-Blumen calls "outsiders within." In other words, members that are part of an organization but not an accepted part of its culture.<sup>36</sup> According to her, the greatest manifestation of "outsiders within" is the

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whistle blower. Insiders who view them as pursuing their own interests commonly reject whistle blowers. Moreover, peers frequently punish them even when they are telling the truth because of fears that the wrath of the toxic leader will spill over them.<sup>37</sup> In summary, toxic leaders exploit group dynamics by isolating and spotlighting traitors, troublemakers, and non-team players. They use intimidation to ensure others isolate and reject non-team players. Left unchecked, followers will emerge to support toxic leaders in their positions because it will appear to be in their best interest. Viewing the organization as inactive in solving the situation and needing to stay in good standing for career progression, perceptive followers who know where they stand will keep quiet in fear of what they might lose.<sup>38</sup>

Like many civilian businesses, the military deliberately structures organizations to keep leaders in power in order to provide stability. This can be harmful when toxic leaders emerge because increased structural resiliency may obstruct follower feedback.<sup>39</sup> However, followers also bolster the resiliency of toxic leaders by not providing feedback through the chain of command to those who could stop harmful actions and policies. To understand this phenomenon, it is important to explore the general types of followers and individual characteristics that drive their interests and behaviors.

Followers of toxic leaders can be either benign, part of the leader's entourage, or malevolent.<sup>40</sup> Benign followers enable toxic leadership behavior by spending the majority of their efforts pursuing their own goals and interests. Within this category, two types of benign followers are worth mentioning. First, anxious benign followers, who search for a strong leader who offers the illusion of safety, heroism, fame, and perhaps immortality by participating in the leader's "noble vision".<sup>41</sup> Second, pragmatic benign followers, whose motivation rests in

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practical concerns of personal, economic, professional, or political well-being.<sup>42</sup> They tolerate toxic leadership behavior as long as it does not affect their jobs, retirement, reputations, family, or everyday lives.<sup>43</sup> For these benign followers, toxic leaders may keep their power and influence as long as they meet their interests. In contrast, members of the leader's entourage are different from benign followers because they actively work to keep the toxic leader in power. Belonging to the "in-group" is a common way that followers convince themselves that their lives have meaning. These followers protect the leader from failure by using their social network to control and influence organizational dynamics. They may offer themselves as sacrifices to protect the leader when he/she makes mistakes, and derive their status based on their relationship to the leader and the amount of power that the leader has.<sup>44</sup> For military members of the leader's entourage, keeping their leader in power, regardless of toxicity, can be appealing especially if he/she is the gateway to the next promotion or job. Finally, the last type of follower commonly found in organizations is the malevolent follower. This type of follower is often a future toxic leader him/herself. Their main motivations are ambition, envy, and competitiveness, and are often unknown to the leader.<sup>45</sup> Unlike followers in a leader's entourage, who actively act to safeguard the toxic leader, the malevolent follower's actions have the potential to undermine organizational interests and create new toxic behaviors. Because of their actions, toxic and non-toxic leaders with unidentified malevolent followers may develop self-defense mechanisms that undermine organizational effectiveness and erode personal influence.

Confronting toxic leadership becomes extremely difficult when taking these categories of followers into account. Psychologist Kurt Lewin's theory of social behavior states that it is the greater of driving and restraining forces that guides our behavior.<sup>46</sup> Driving forces are those that

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compel to take action, while restraining forces do the opposite. Interestingly enough, group dynamics respond to stimulus in a similar way. Dr. Lipman-Blumen found in her toxic followership study that proximity to the toxic leader, information availability, cost (perceived risk), and identification with the victim of toxic leaders, prompts action or inaction by bystanders.<sup>47</sup> In her research, she also found that powerful groups who see the victims of toxic leaders as “others” will rarely take action, and that the size, power and knowledge of the group affects actions against toxic leaders.<sup>48</sup> This leaves victims with limited options to counter the toxic leader.

Usually, followers can choose to counter toxic leaders in three ways. Followers can confront the leader directly and thereby take the risk of reciprocity. This is uncommon as it often results in poor career and reputational outcomes for the confronter.<sup>49</sup> They can quietly undermine or join with others to confront the leader. This is usually more successful but is difficult in military organizations where the power-distance is usually large and where the toxic leader often controls the avenues to further career progression. In addition, this approach involves more risk and, in the long term, affects their families and reputations. Besides, they must confront the leader’s entourage who stand to benefit from the current leader’s favor. In lieu of these counterbalancing options, many individuals choose the path of avoidance. This is why establishing a deliberate, system-wide, educational approach, combined with 360-degree feedback is critical to curtailing toxicity in the military. The poor incentives for individual action, and strong impediments to group action pose significant barriers. Fortunately, senior military leaders may implement broad organizational changes and requirements that might be

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more difficult to bring about in the civilian sector. An examination of why coercion works for toxic leaders needs to preface the analysis of these needed changes.

4.1. Coercion and Why it Works

In *Coercion and its Fallout*, Murray Sidman defines coercion as behavior that compels someone under duress to do something against his or her will.<sup>50</sup> Coercion connects behavior to consequences and encompasses two main categories: negative reinforcement and punishment. Negative reinforcement is the introduction of negative stimulus in response to behavior. In contrast, punishment is the loss of positive reinforcement or use of negative reinforcement to modify behavior.<sup>51</sup> In any case, in behavioral analysis, the most fundamental law of conduct is that consequences control behavior and, as a rule, leaders, parents, teachers, etc., employ coercion in different ways to modify behavior along societal and organizational interests. In fact, experts believe that succeeding in changing behavior over time involves mild punishment (coercion) followed by positive reinforcement.<sup>52</sup> This approach helps discontinue bad behavior and stimulates the advent of good, self-sustaining behavior. Subsequently, it is worth examining the spillover effects of overusing coercion without positive reinforcement.

The manner in which leaders use coercion has a significant impact on shaping toxicity. Positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement (or punishment) create different effects on recipients. Indeed, educators analyzing the use of positive and negative reinforcement to encourage learning in high school found that there was a direct correlation between coercion and the students' long-term commitment to learning.<sup>53</sup> In fact, students who learned through positive reinforcement felt encouraged and pursued new learning on their own, while those who learned through coercion (negative reinforcement) focused on completing just enough of their work to



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avoid negative stimulus.<sup>54</sup> Research indicates that effective use of coercive strategies affects the relationship the coerced have with the subject for the rest of their lives. The reason that this occurs is that, over time, as mentioned before, negative enforcers generate either escape or avoidance responses. In other words, negative motivation makes recipients fixate on behaviors that avoid undesirable stimulus/punishment and encourages them to either escape or avoid the situation.<sup>55</sup> In fact, psychoanalysis shows that people who use punishment become conditioned punishers themselves. They reflect and repeat those conducts on others, transmitting their behavior in the form of aggression.<sup>56</sup> For their part, followers experiencing the effects of spillover aggression fear, hate, and avoid their aggressors. Put differently, for those individuals who chastise other people, their presence becomes a punishment in and of itself.<sup>57</sup> In sum, toxic leaders use coercion because it works, and forces their subordinates to shift strategies to satisfy their needs in an attempt to avoid their influence. Students of leadership must acknowledge that their behavior has direct effects on subordinates and those around them. In an organization where flexibility, creative thinking, trust, and retention is a necessity, these behaviors have a negative influence on its overall effectiveness. Fortunately, subordinates in the military have proven that they are effective in identifying and reacting to leaders who are coercive in nature.

In his work *Machiavellianism and Its Relation to Leader Effectiveness Among Career Air Force Officers*, Dr. Raymond Hamilton II studied the effectiveness of high-Machiavellian (high-Mach) and low-Machiavellian (low-Mach) leaders as career officers in the military. In his research, he defined Machiavellian leaders as “individuals who mistrusts human nature, disregard conventional morality and are self-serving in considering relationships with other people.”<sup>58</sup> For their part, high-Mach leaders view people as resources they can manipulate,

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demonstrate a lack of affection in interpersonal relationships, and focus on accomplishing tangible goals and objectives rather than planning for long-term goals.<sup>59</sup> Low-Mach leaders differ from high-Mach leaders in their degree of control and manipulation of people to achieve the goals and objectives of the organization.<sup>60</sup> This contrast reflects the inner-makeup and approach that task-oriented and people-oriented leaders have towards accomplishing organizational goals.

Dr. Hamilton's study analyzed the effect of these leaders on their subordinates by collecting and analyzing survey responses by career officers who have worked for each type of leader. Unsurprisingly, although the high-Mach leaders showed quick adaptability and flexibility in the face of immediate obstacles and an uncanny ability to overcome challenges, subordinates favored low-Mach leaders in several areas. In addition, his research showed that leadership perception, work facilitation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration were the three highest categories that career officers valued in their leaders.<sup>61</sup> Characteristics such as individual consideration overshadowed charisma, which reflects the long-standing desire by career officers to work for leaders who challenge their capabilities while also appreciating them personally.<sup>62</sup> Simply put, people want to work for bosses who value them. Subordinates see very capable bosses who fail to focus on people as being less effective than bosses with average capabilities who personally connect with their subordinates. In sum, emphasizing the importance of embracing the people-dimension of leadership is necessary to build an effective leadership force. Therefore, the US military needs effective, task-oriented leaders just as much as it needs people-focused leaders. However, high-Mach leaders (task-focused) are only as effective as low-Mach leaders (people-focused) when task-orientation overshadows the

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emotional dimensions of leadership. The conclusion is that the military needs to provide education and 360-degree feedback throughout an officer's career in order to stress the necessity of emotional intelligence to developing leaders. Regarding specific ways to mitigate toxic leadership, a case study of the sexual assault prevention program offers valuable parallelisms in achieving behavioral change within large groups of participants.

**5. Sexual Assault: A Parallel Case Study**

The DoD must modify its paradigm to combat toxic leadership. On that regard, the lines of effort associated with addressing the DoD's pervasive issue of sexual assault stand out as a beneficial template. The potential of toxic leadership to cause individual and institutional embarrassment, and enduring pain, has contextual similarities to sexual assault. Sexual assault and harassment scandals have plagued and tarnished the image of the US military for decades. As a result, several senior leaders have seen their prominent careers curtailed when mainstream news media outlets unveiled their involvement in scandals of a varied nature. This exposes the reality that the US military harbors the ills of the society it serves to protect. This fact transcends rank, nationality, race, religion or gender. The 2003 US Air Force Academy (USAFA) sexual assault scandal serves as a prime example. Close to 12 percent of the women who graduated from the USAFA that year had been victims of rape or attempted rape during their four years at the academy.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, of the 659 women attending the academy in 2003, 579 volunteered to participate in a survey that revealed roughly 70 percent had been victims of sexual assault and nearly four out of five women never filed a formal report.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, prior to the scandal making its rounds on primetime news stations, the USAFA had reported that in the previous 10

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years leading up to 2003, it had only investigated 54 sexual assault or rape cases at the institution.<sup>65</sup> The impact of this scandal cast a long shadow of shame, regret, and pain.

Presently, there are men and women currently serving in the USAF who still carry the weight and burden of these traumatic actions. These unfortunate incidents have forever warped the lens in which each victim views the world, thereby altering their interaction with the people who share their space. Additionally, there are other victims who could not bear to serve under the same flag as their perpetrators, and simply took the nearest exit at the first opportunity, adding to the attrition of highly-talented Airmen and a decrease in overall mission effectiveness. A recent 2016 Status of Forces Survey of DoD active duty members showed that 59 percent of respondents stated they “strongly disagree”, “disagree” or were “indifferent” when asked to respond to the statement “I would not leave the military right now because I have a sense of obligation to the people in it.”<sup>66</sup> This metric is critical to understanding that military members are not tethered to the people they serve with. In addition, this sentiment can be exasperated when leaders treat unfairly those they serve with (i.e. toxic leadership situations). To this point, two out of five service members who had been sexually harassed or discriminated against in the past year stated that the events made them “want to leave the military.”<sup>67</sup> Systemic injustices such as sexual assault on Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen, enabled by a culture of ignorance and neglect, is at the heart of the reason why the DoD decided to take a formal stance against sexual assault.

The DoD must draw a line in the sand and begin to formally wage war on toxic leadership, as it has for sexual assault. Following numerous incidents involving sexual assault within the military, the DoD finally decided to take this issue seriously, and in 2005 it officially

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established the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Office. Upon its creation, its objectives were to “promote prevention, encourage increased reporting of the crime, and improve response capabilities for victims.”<sup>68</sup> The DoD spearheaded actions to accomplish its mission of reducing sexual assault in the military, with the ultimate goal of eliminating it altogether.<sup>69</sup> In similar fashion, the DoD should apply similar lines of effort to combating toxic leadership. Following the stand up of SAPR Office, the DoD noticed an immediate 40 percent increase in sexual assault reporting from 2004 to 2005.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, the subsequent year produced another 24 percent increase in reporting, and a few years later, in FY13, unprecedented leadership emphasis on the program contributed to a 53 percent increase (from the previous fiscal year), followed by another 11 percent increase in FY14.<sup>71</sup>

The increase in “restricted” cases (no formal investigation demanded) and “unrestricted” cases (formal investigation demanded) clearly shows the power of influence an institution has on the norms and behaviors of the people within it. However, the conversion rate of “restricted” to “unrestricted” reporting articulates the real power of institutional legitimacy and its perceived protection of the victim. These two elements are necessary to help reduce the amount of toxic leaders within the military. In FY13, the DoD reported that it converted a total of 1,501 restricted reports to unrestricted reports, garnering a 14 percent conversion rate.<sup>72</sup> Subsequently, in FY15, it converted over 1,900 restricted reports to unrestricted reports, resulting in an overall conversion rate of 21 percent.<sup>73</sup> Thus, a conversion rate increase of 7 percent in just two fiscal years is a testament to the program’s ability to promote a sense of legitimacy and safety among the victims. The report highlights the benefits unrestricted reporting has afforded. Specifically, it states, “Efforts to improve victim response and increase reporting are important because they

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connect victims with restorative care and support. Such efforts also provide the DoD the only means with which to hold alleged offenders appropriately accountable.”<sup>74</sup> Additionally, the report reassures victims by stating, “Victims must be confident that, should they report, they will be treated fairly. Part of that fair treatment is to ensure they know and can exercise their rights.”<sup>75</sup>

The reasons why victims report, the potential for human biases, and the duration of mistreatment associated with sexual assault/harassment, are three important elements of this sexual assault case study. An evaluation of these elements provides a broader picture and greater insight into the similarities with toxic leadership. When surveyed, victims of sexual harassment listed as their top reasons for reporting, “to stop the offender from hurting others,” “someone you told encouraged you to report,” and “to stop the offender from hurting you again.”<sup>76</sup> The notion that victims have a strong inclination to protect others from the abuse they experienced provides validity to the suggested solution to mitigate toxic leadership. In other words, allowing subordinates to provide honest qualitative feedback on the level of toxicity of their supervisor or coworker incentivizes the protection of others in the future. In addition, when establishing criteria to effectively measure toxicity, these criteria will need to account for human biases. Traditionally, the results of sexual harassment surveys show a tendency towards these types of preconceptions. For example, 70 percent of women surveyed were more likely to consider an experienced event as sexual harassment than men were (50 percent).<sup>77</sup> Concerning this, continual education is critical to counterbalance these gender perceptions, ensuring all members understand the formal definition of sexual harassment, or in the case of this study, toxic leadership. Finally, another similarity surfaces when considering the amount of time during

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which victims are inclined to endure pain. This relates to the aforementioned tendency by subordinates to tolerate a toxic leader in silence. For example, data shows that 33 percent of members who experienced sexual harassment or gender discrimination indicated that the mistreatment continued for “a few months,” and an additional 25 percent indicated that it continued for “a year or more.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, toxic leaders who are dedicated to only their own needs tend to thrive in environments that allow their behavior to be unchallenged. Moreover, the hierarchy system of the military might demotivate subordinates to speak out. In the end, establishing a system that promotes institutional legitimacy by pursuing the development of new cultural norms and behaviors can help mitigate these and other variables that influence the prevalence of toxic environments.

Focusing on prevention methods such as SAPR bystander prevention training and the newly DoD-incorporated Green Dot Program could provide the greatest insight into the method of educating the force about toxic leadership. Of the 540,000 Active Duty members surveyed in FY15, roughly 3 percent indicated that they observed a situation they believed “was, or could have led to” a sexual assault. Of the 3 percent that reported witnessing the crime, 88 percent indicated that they took some type of action in response.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, taking immediate action becomes a disabling mechanism. A notion that is also applicable in a toxic environment. In those instances, the impact of senior leaders on organizational culture influenced the witnesses’ decision to act. In fact, in units where commanders encouraged bystander intervention, 93 percent of respondents indicated that they took action, in contrast to only 76 percent of respondents in units where commanders offered little or no encouragement to bystander intervention.<sup>80</sup> The obvious conclusion is that leadership matters, and in the case of sexual

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assault and/or toxic environments, it becomes a center of gravity. In addition to the positive gains of SAPR bystander prevention training, the USAF has recently shifted to an educational program called “Green Dot” that focuses on a systemic approach to combatting inappropriate behavior.

The Green Dot strategy is a “comprehensive approach to violence prevention that capitalizes on the power of peer and cultural influence across all levels of the socioecological model.”<sup>81</sup> The primary focus is to instill confidence in each person to speak out or take action in the event of a perceived injustice. To that end, the program trains male and female students to identify situations and behaviors that may be conducive to violence and decide which actions they could safely take to diminish the probability or consequences of that violence.<sup>82</sup> The systemic approach of Green Dot hinges on social diffusion theory, which advocates that if opinion leaders publicly endorse and support a new behavioral construct, this will initiate behavior change in that population.<sup>83</sup> Within this construct, the Green Dot program targets the norms of behavior for an entire organization/society and acknowledges that violence affects communities as a whole. Therefore, the solution must also target the entire community. Green Dot’s influential training approach attempts to galvanize at least one individual to stand up and speak out. According to a study funded by the Center for Disease Control, this approach has achieved a 50 percent reduction in sexual violence in high schools implementing it.<sup>84</sup> The USAF took note of Green Dot’s success, and incorporated its methodology to prevent violence in December 2015 after realizing that the previous educational approach, which targeted perpetrators and encouraged victims to come forward, did not reduce the number of offenses.<sup>85</sup> Since then, Green Dot has become the primary method of instruction to cover annual SAPR



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training requirements in the Air Force. This model is ideal for combating toxic leadership and instilling confidence in subordinates and peers to speak out when witnessing injustice.

The Green Dot rationale is easily applicable to toxic leadership because destructive leaders are noticeable not only to those they lead, but also to their peers and, to some degree, to their superiors. Therefore, a shift towards the Green Dot philosophy would offer valuable insights into possible educational programs to target toxic leadership. First, toxic leadership training should take advantage of social diffusion theory, and apply a systemic approach to education in order to generate a norm shift in our warrior culture. Within this construct, peers, bosses and subordinates would identify, delegitimize, and minimize toxic behaviors collectively by taking ownership and working together. As in the case of violent behavior, victims of toxic leadership include the entire organization/society and not just the leader and subordinates themselves. This training initiative must promote subordinate behaviors that empower good leaders and point out those organizational attitudes and cultural factors that undercut leader influence. In addition, it must emphasize leadership approaches that maximize organizational effectiveness. Simply put, after implementing this educational approach, every member of the US military would take accountability for his or her role in encouraging effective leadership behavior and discouraging destructive behavior. Through shared ownership and effort, a shift in cultural norms and a greater awareness to combat toxicity can be a reality across the force. In sum, based on the social diffusion theory Green Dot utilizes, a similar construct will help reduce the incidence of toxic leadership in the US military. By doing so, the DoD will shift its paradigm to mitigate toxic leadership from reactive to proactive solutions. The parallelisms between sexual assault prevention and toxic leadership mitigation are evident. Therefore, an adaption of

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SAPR's organization and Green Dot's bystander prevention, combined with the legitimacy and security they provide, could be the key to changing the cultural norms and behaviors in the fight against toxic leadership.

**6. A Systemic Approach to Shift from Reactive to Proactive Solutions**

**6.1. Mitigating Toxic Leadership Through Education**

The US military already contains some of the most successful leadership development programs in the world. Instead of revamping the leadership development paradigm in the US military, new efforts should thread in deliberate measures that counter toxic behavior throughout an officer's career. This educational approach should incorporate two additions to the current leadership development programs. First, annual refresher training for all service members and government employees should incorporate toxic leadership training that encourages proper behavior while highlighting and sustaining pathways to combat toxic leaders. Second, developmental education congregated around rank and positional transitions should include an assessment of toxic pitfalls to prepare individuals for increased responsibilities and raise their overall self-awareness of toxic behaviors.

Annual refresher training for all service members and government employees should incorporate toxic leadership training that encourages proper behavior while highlighting and sustaining pathways to identify toxic leaders. The success of the Green Dot program in combatting violence using social diffusion theory and a systemic approach to attain organizational cultural shifts offer evidence that similar methods may yield results in curtailing toxic leadership. Toxic behavior is a problem that affects the entire organization and greater military community. Beyond rote retention rates and inspection results, toxic behavior erodes

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the collective trust and belief in the organization's mission, values, and capabilities held by everyone connected to the behavior. Annual training must stress collective ownership, leverage the peer influence of opinion leaders, and create an open forum for feedback that initiates change when needed. Senior military leaders must stress to the rest of the organization the reoccurring assessment systems and their role at every annual training session. This will help counter fears of reciprocity and encourage collective participation by every echelon of the organization.

The ultimate objective of incorporating toxic leadership training into annual refresher training is two-fold. First, it reestablishes the notion that humans are fundamentally flawed and that leadership is a choice. Toxic leadership behavior will continue to occur at all levels in the military, but fostering a culture of identification and intolerance for such behavior will make its survival less likely in the end. As Retired General Stephen R. Lorenz states in his book, *Lorenz on Leadership*, "Trust and accountability rely on feedback for success. We all have blind spots – areas where we think things are better than they are. To correct these, we need to be aware of them. This means that we need to encourage dissenting opinions and negative feedback."<sup>86</sup> Second, annual training that targets harmful leadership behaviors reinforces organizational commitment to the members and families of the US military. This is an important point General (ret) Lorenz also emphasizes when stating, "Although the Air Force family helps support and steer us through our service, trust is the foundation of our existence."<sup>87</sup> In sum, only by iteratively building and reinforcing confidence within the organization's members that toxic behavior must be identified and will not be tolerated, will the US military curtail toxicity over the long-run. Therefore, in order for these educational efforts to be effective, they have to be a part of the curriculum in all formal US military education phases.

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Major rank and positional transitions should include toxic leadership training. Developmental courses such as Basic Developmental Education (BDE), Intermediate Developmental Education (IDE), Senior Developmental Education (SDE), and the Squadron Commander's Course offer opportunities to refine leadership skills. These programs are significant because of their timing, as they mark critical transition points between roles in an Officer's career. Behavior that might benefit an officer earlier in his or her career might create friction as their role in the organization changes. On that regard, in their book *The Extraordinary Leader*, Zenger and Folkman provide insights into this effect while studying what it takes to develop good managers into great leaders. During their research, they analyzed more than 11,000 managers to develop a list of critical interpersonal shortcomings that undermine leadership effectiveness.<sup>88</sup> Subsequently, Zenger and Folkman aggregated these shortcomings into 10 "fatal flaws" that manifest themselves in roughly 30 percent of surveyed managers throughout their careers. Any leader possessing a fatal flaw scored in the 37th percentile of leadership effectiveness, demonstrating how dramatic some interpersonal deficiencies can be on the overall perception of leadership capabilities. However, even though a third of the participants possessed a fatal flaw in their leadership skills, Zenger and Folkman acknowledge that whether that weakness rises to the level of a fatal flaw is dependent on the importance of that leader's current job.<sup>89</sup> This provides some clarity concerning why talented officers rise to positions of authority and then fail. Simply put, all leaders possess flaws, but "fatal flaws" that can derail leadership effectiveness may not influence an officer's career until he or she bears the burden of greater responsibility.

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In order to counter this possibility, developmental programs must incorporate training that focuses rising stars on transitioning into their new leadership roles while minimizing the impact of toxic characteristics. Many service components already incorporate Zenger and Folkman's strength-based developmental approach to leadership development. Nevertheless, these schools also offer valuable periods of reflection that help in identifying a fatal flaw before it derails an organization's effectiveness or an officer's career. In order for an officer to qualify as possessing a fatal flaw, their presence must be obvious to even the casual observer. These ten fatal flaws are: (1) not inspiring due to a lack of energy and enthusiasm; (2) accepting mediocre performance in place of excellent results; (3) lack of clear vision and direction; (4) loss of trust stemming from perceived bad judgment and poor decisions; (5) not a collaborative, team player; (6) not a good role model (failure to walk the talk); (7) no self-development and learning from mistakes; (8) lacking interpersonal skills; (9) resistant to new ideas; and (10) focus in on self, not on the development of others.<sup>90</sup>

The identification and elimination of a fatal flaw is critical to curtailing toxic leadership because Zenger and Folkman's research found that improving one of these areas dramatically increased subordinate perception of leadership effectiveness. Their conclusion is that leaders with fatal flaws must fix them or may eventually fail to be effective at influencing others when placed in roles that demand their use or highlight their deficiencies.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, these deficiencies are called "sins of omission," illustrating that a leader's inability to do something drives the perception of ineffectiveness. In the end, through increased education, leaders will improve their self-awareness, and this will aid in highlighting shortcomings in critical areas of emotional intelligence expected in upcoming leadership roles. That way, rising leaders will have

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the opportunity to accurately assess their competencies and develop their approach to minimize toxic behaviors.

6.2. Mitigating Toxic Leadership through Feedback

The second initiative to combat toxic leadership leverages 360-degree feedback to identify harmful behavior to both the perpetrator and senior leadership in that individual's chain of command. The US military has already begun to solicit 360-degree feedback by implementing a Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback tool (MSAF 360). This tool relies on confidential feedback from subordinates, peers, and supervisors to inform a leader of his/her strengths and weaknesses. When MSAF 360 identifies a weakness, it provides coaching resources to improve leadership perception and performance. Currently, the feedback is only accessible to the rated individual and not to his rater and senior rater. Even though a commander may request a trend analysis of his unit to build general awareness of the organizational climate, he/she cannot access an individual assessment.<sup>92</sup> In contrast, expanding access to the MSAF 360 to the senior rater is in the best interest of the US military because it will enhance the superior's situational awareness. The MSAF 360 provides a very valid assessment of the officer's overall performance and it affords him/her a better opportunity to participate in leadership development. In the end, however, greater access to MSAF 360 must balance the interests of both the individual and the chain of command. The leadership assessment must provide scores in critical performance areas based on the officer's rank and current responsibilities. Specifically designed questionnaires within MSAF 360 would be the source of the score. This initiative has the potential to empower subordinates and peers to voice their concerns through yearly assessments, thereby encouraging leadership development by incorporating supervisor and senior rater access

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to subordinate scores. That way, if an individual assessment score falls below acceptable levels, the supervisor can take action and assist that individual by providing mentorship and guidance to alter his/her behavior. In the event that guidance is not successful in modifying the toxic leader's behavior, and his/her actions continue to violate organizational values, customs, and norms, the assessment score will offer a starting point to begin evaluating the readiness of the toxic leader in question to succeed in future leadership roles.

Adopting this initiative will allow the US military to be more proactive in countering toxic leadership while promoting transparency and accountability. To that end, the 2014 CASAL tries to capture the overall perception on leadership and leader development across the force.<sup>93</sup> A noteworthy finding of the report is that less than four percent of leaders displayed more counter-productive than productive behaviors. Although this number may seem quite low, the report also emphasized that “past CASAL studies have found that the term [toxic leadership] is not consistently interpreted in the Army.”<sup>94</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that this lack of a uniform definition might have influenced to some degree the overall perception of the incidence of toxic leadership. However, the determination of the extent of that influence would require further investigation that exceeds the scope of this paper. Consequently, the research team accepts the CASAL data as valid, and extrapolates it to the rest of the services, in the understanding that the actual incidence of toxic leadership in the military is not as important as its consequences. As previously mentioned, those consequences are multifaceted, and serious enough to merit proposing a new approach to mitigate toxic leadership. In any case, it is true that some cases that have generated high profile media coverage have also contributed to fuel the perception of toxicity in the US military.

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An example of toxic leadership that generated consternation within Army ranks was the 2014 trial of Brigadier General Jeffrey Sinclair.<sup>95</sup> Accused of forcible sodomy, adultery, and sustaining a 3-year affair with a subordinate, General Sinclair pleaded guilty to the affair and was able to retain his service pension at a reduced rate (Lieutenant Colonel) in spite of a clear violation of organizational values.<sup>96</sup> The lack of a prison sentence generated significant media coverage and, arguably, might have contributed to some degree to increase the perception of toxicity within the US military.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, the firing of high-ranking officers for toxic attributes, while small in numbers, may also fuel the perception of toxicity. For example, in September 2016, the Commanding General for the 1st Armored Division, Major General Pat White, relieved Colonel Earl Higgins from command for violations of sexual harassment and equal opportunity policies and for creating a hostile work environment.<sup>98</sup> To illustrate this point further, the Army Times reported that 129 Army Battalion and Brigade commanders had been relieved since 2003. The report also indicated that several General officers received reprimands for harmful behavior antithetical to service values.<sup>99</sup> From this data, the obvious question is why such high-ranking officers are being relieved from their commands. Specifically, it would be helpful to know whether there were instances early in their careers that may have hinted their potential toxicity. In that regard, having a leadership assessment score that covers the length of an officer's career would give the US military an opportunity to identify toxic behaviors and ensure that the right leaders achieve the high honor of leading America's sons and daughters. Equally important, adopting the leadership assessment score ensures the early identification of potential toxic leaders, when the impact of their toxicity is less severe, and when coaching and mentoring by superiors can still prevent their toxicity to derail their careers.



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The 360 assessments need to incentivize better behavior by tracking subordinate, peer, and boss' perceptions over the course of an officer's career, thus accomplishing the objective of building better leaders. Behaviors that promote organizational values must positively influence career assessments to achieve officer buy-in. Significant aspects of servant leadership attributes should have a great influence on an individual's leadership score. Conversely, egotistical and selfish behaviors should affect the score negatively. This leadership assessment score would function similar to a person's credit score. Instead of grading financial habits, the survey data would capture great or adverse leadership attributes.

Implementing the leadership assessment score may cause concern because of the need for displaying the score on the Officer Record Brief (ORB). However, to assuage apprehension that a lower score may give the wrong impression to a promotion board, the leadership assessment score should be masked from the promotion board, but visible to raters and senior raters. Furthermore, raters and senior raters would have the obligation to access the officer's leadership assessment score during their initial and quarterly counseling sessions. Their increased awareness will have an impact on the behavior of the toxic leader and may drive further engagement during the rating period. In addition, this would send a powerful signal to toxic leaders who would realize that they could no longer hide their toxicity from raters and senior raters. This is crucial because, unlike subordinates, raters and senior raters rarely learn about or experience the toxicity of leaders until there is an investigation, at which time it is too late to take proactive action. By adopting the leadership assessment score approach, the US military would allow subordinates and peers to give one more data point to the rater and senior rater to consider in counseling and evaluating leaders. Finally, by capturing an individual's score over the course

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of his or her career, the feedback acts as a powerful indicator of leadership effectiveness, and offers an opportunity for self-reflection and improvement if the feedback is below expectations. An example of how the leadership assessment score would work will help in understanding its utility.

A Second Lieutenant reports to her first duty assignment and meets with her rater and senior rater for her initial counseling session. After ten months into the rating period, the officer's subordinates and peers would log into the MSAF 360 and take a specifically designed questionnaire to evaluate the officer's leadership attributes. Subsequently, the officer's ORB would reflect the analyzed data from the survey, and would depict it graphically in the form of a leadership assessment score. To ensure an officer receives an objective evaluation from his rater and senior rater, the leadership assessment score for the current rating period would offer a comparison to the peer average in both grade and position for that rating period. In addition, as mentioned before, promotion boards would not see this information. At each yearly feedback session, the officer and his supervisor would discuss her performance and incorporate 360-degree feedback results. Additionally, when the officer changes duty station, her new rater and senior rater would have access to the leadership assessment score during the initial counseling period. This would encourage a constant dialogue between the leader, her subordinates, peers, raters and senior raters throughout her career. The leadership assessment score for a younger and newer officer may be lower initially because of time in service, lack of leadership experience, number of evaluations, and many other factors. However, over the course of that officer's career, the score would probably increase based on the quality of her leadership attributes. Finally, the standard of performance expected from raters and senior raters would increase as the

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officer progresses into new roles during her career. Although there are some legitimate concerns with adopting the leadership assessment score approach, it offers a transparent approach to development and assessment over the course of a career while safeguarding against harmful influence. In broader terms, feedback will also play an important role at the unit level.

Military leaders who want to implement action plans to fix toxicity at the unit level should share general feedback with the organization after analyzing survey results. This encourages collective ownership, incorporates subordinate feedback, and restores organizational trust. When these efforts help identify a toxic leader within the organization, depending on the degree of toxicity and the damage caused to the organization, there are varying degrees of measures that will help restore the unit trust and cohesion. As mentioned before, in the mild cases that surface early on in the military career, the superiors of that incipient toxic leader must provide advice and mentorship. This will shift the approach from reactive to proactive, taking action before the only option is command relief or discharge from the military. This will also ensure that the armed forces retain valuable human capital. In contrast, in the most severe cases of toxic leadership that have already caused great damage to the organization, senior military leaders must be willing to remove those destructive leaders from their roles to show that the feedback process is working effectively. In addition, this will aid in sending the message that the organization does not condone those behaviors and subordinates should not take them as role models and replicate them. It is important to stress that leadership behavior that is unpopular with subordinates, but not against the values of the US military, is not the focus of this effort. Rather, these open feedback mechanisms target harmful influence that runs counter to sound organizational values and effectiveness. After making a decision to remove toxic leaders, senior

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leadership must relay to members of the organization why they are making the change, acknowledge the role of member feedback in making the decision, and reaffirm a commitment to maintaining high professional standards in both leadership and subordinate roles. In the end, through an adequate use of these feedback tools, the US military can significantly improve its officer development while building a more lethal and agile fighting force to combat future challenges in a multi-polar world.

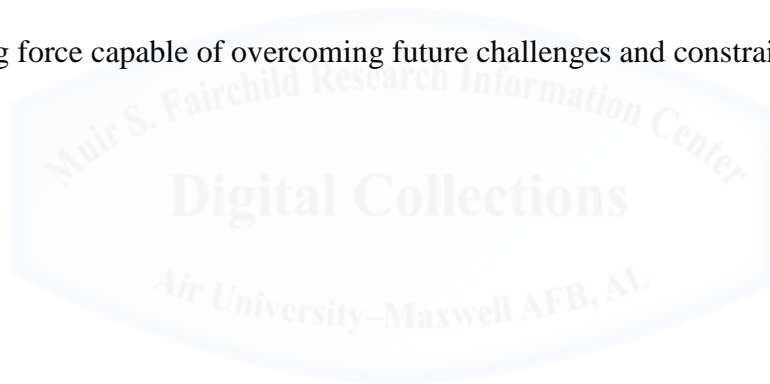
## **7. Conclusions**

The study of toxic leadership in the military has concentrated on establishing the characteristics of toxic leadership and providing corrective measures for individuals with a long history of toxic leadership. This reactive approach overlooks the fact the US military cannot afford the degree of damage these individuals cause to the organization as an aftermath of years of toxic leadership. To counter this reality, the US military should pursue several avenues. First, it must agree on a common definition of toxic leadership and its characteristics to achieve unity of effort across its joint force. Second, it should benchmark off effective systemic educational approaches such as Green Dot, to create and sustain a community-wide shift in norms towards zero tolerance of toxic leadership. This educational approach will also reinforce core service values outside of established professional military education channels where similar leadership education already occurs. Finally, an effective implementation of 360-degree feedback tools will develop a career baseline of leadership capabilities and performance. The transparency generated from leadership assessment scores and mandatory supervisor involvement will offer comprehensive feedback to officers and their organizational leadership. Officers who cannot

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meet organizational expectations and/or fail to uphold personal and professional standards of conduct will face a greater risk of being exposed and having their careers curtailed.

Although this paper's suggestions will assist US military leadership in curtailing toxic leadership and its consequences, it will also benefit the leaders themselves. Every leader has blind spots where their self-awareness is lacking clarity. The earlier supervisors can reward and incentivize proper behavior, the greater change an individual can make to bolster his or her effectiveness. With looming retention challenges and the emergence of peer adversaries on the world stage, it is paramount to acquire, develop, and retain the highest quality officer corps. Taking proactive steps to eliminate toxic leadership, the US military stands to build an effective and agile fighting force capable of overcoming future challenges and constraints.



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